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we reveal the movers and shakers who  
have defined a great British festival



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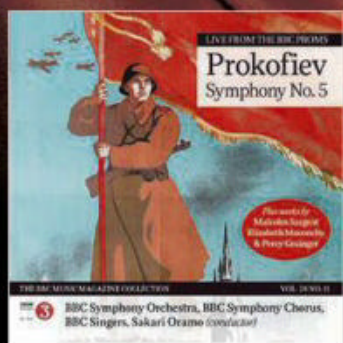
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The biggest stage:  
Andrew Davis conducts  
the 2018 Last Night  
of the Proms



# THE PEOPLE

*who shaped the*

# THE PROMS

To celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Proms, **Michael White** introduces the extraordinary figures, past and present, who have moulded and changed this august and unique music festival

**T**he Proms have never been a simple concert series: they outgrew that almost from the start, turning into a statement of the nation's musical credentials – with peculiar status as a platform for what counted as significant at any time from 1895, when they began, through to the present day.

It's a responsibility that hangs (occasionally like a millstone) round the neck of Proms administrators, and it's why Proms seasons matter. But they matter, too, as a community of people who across the years have been the flesh and blood of this great enterprise. Proms people.

From conductors and soloists to generations of audience members, there are thousands of them, so the few I've picked to celebrate here can't be more than illustrative. But they give a sense of how the Proms season has developed over time, shaped by successive personalities into a mighty celebration that survived two world wars and will survive what the world is facing now. Albeit with some adaptation. ▶





Park life: Aida Garifullina entertains in 2019

## Proms in the Park

*How the Last Night moved outdoors*



The idea of a Proms in the Park event back in the mid-1990s was pooh-poohed by John Drummond (see p31) who suggested he'd be happier watching the last Night of

the Proms on telly than sit 'in a damp park'. But the old curmudgeon was proved wrong, and in 1996, 28,000 turned up at London's Hyde Park to watch Sheridan Morley present a mix of classical and popular artists, with a live link-up to the Albert Hall for the second half of the Last Night. Millions listened on BBC Radio 2. Such was its success that an annual event was born. By 2005, Proms in the Park had spawned sister events in Belfast, Manchester, Swansea and Glasgow, with each 'region' celebrating its identity through performances of Henry Wood's *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*. Presenters such as Terry Wogan (above) and Alan Titchmarsh sealed the Proms in the Park as a 'middle-of-the-road' event, while its broadcast was organised by BBC Live Events, rather than the BBC Proms department. Today, Proms in the Park thrives – last year's featured soprano Aida Garifullina alongside Barry Manilow, Lighthouse Family and Chrissie Hynde, all accompanied by the BBC Concert Orchestra.

Festival figures: (right) a 1926 cigarette card of Proms founder Henry Wood; (far right) conductor Malcolm Sargent and violinist Paul Beard in 1962; (below) the badly mistreated Edgar Speyer

### Henry Wood (1869-1944)

Henry Wood was 26 when, in 1895, he was hired to lead a brand new season of 'Promenade' concerts at the Queen's Hall; and he remained in charge for the next half-century, conducting some 5,000 of them. With 700 premieres and so little rehearsal time it was crazy. When conductor Thomas Beecham said, 'I don't know how you do it: it would kill me', Wood's reply was 'Yes'. And it did almost come to that: in 1902 he had a breakdown.

But he was always a larger-than-life character: flamboyant on the podium to a degree that few British conductors before him had thought appropriate, and prompting Queen Victoria to ask him 'Tell me, Mr Wood, are you *quite* English?' He most definitely was, and always championed English music – not least Vaughan Williams, the premiere of whose Fifth Symphony amid the war-torn 1943 season remains one of the Proms' most symbolic moments and a complete cycle of whose symphonies (five to date) was programmed shortly after Wood's death. Wood, though, also introduced audiences to unfamiliar European repertoire and stood up for the German classics at the height of anti-German feeling.

The initial premise of the Proms was, as expressed, to 'train the public' into broader musical awareness; and Wood's training programme had a comprehensive reach. He taught his audience not to applaud between the movements of a long work. He also taught them to accept female orchestral players, introducing women to his band in 1913 (though he didn't want his ladies playing trombones).

His credentials as a truly great conductor are debatable, but he had no shortage of admirers. One was Schoenberg, for whom Wood was a 'perfect musician, great educator, great benefactor of music, and most charming gentleman.'

### Edgar Speyer (1862-1932)

Concerts don't run without money, which is where Sir Edgar Speyer slips into the story of the Proms. When they began, the funding came from a surprisingly rich laryngologist whose



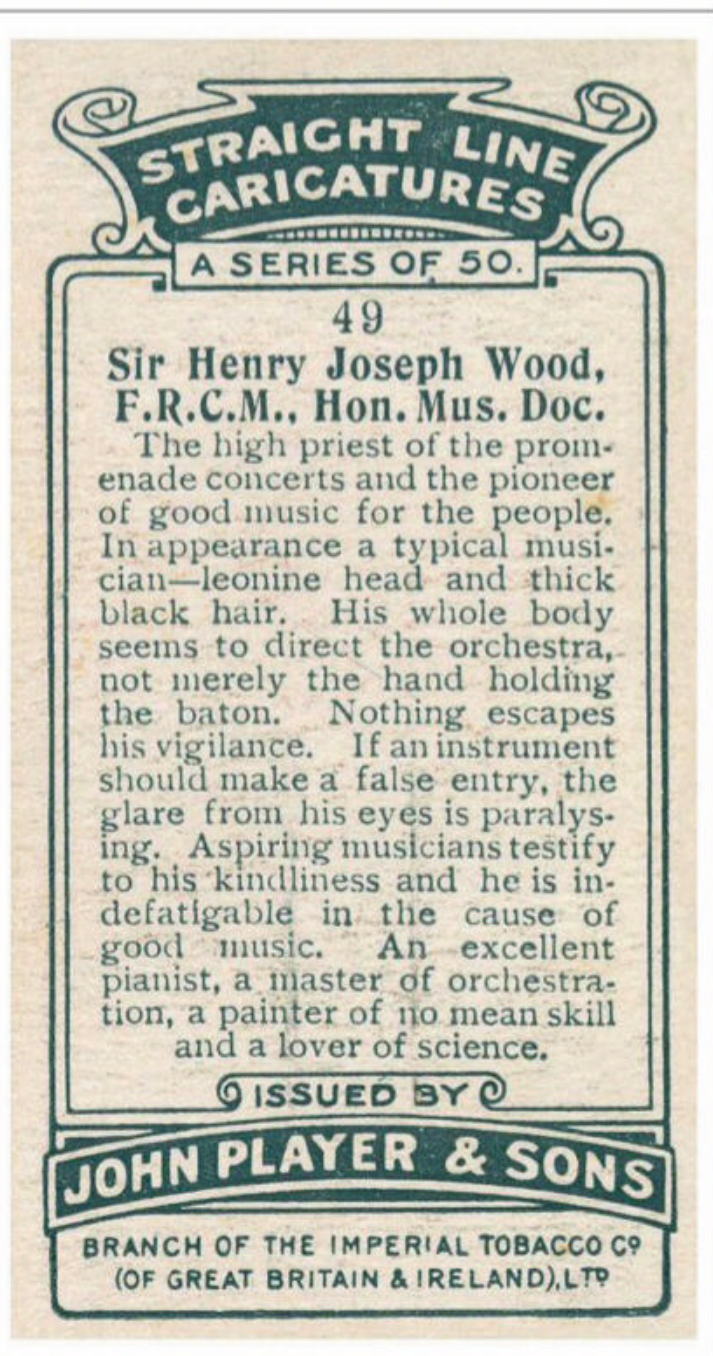
money came with the requirement that everything be performed at lower than usual pitch (to prevent damaged voices), and that a fountain be installed in the promenading area to purify the air (the audiences smoked like chimneys). But when in 1902 the money ran out, insolvency loomed. Things were only saved by Speyer, who came up with the present-day equivalent of £220,000 a year to underwrite the season.

Speyer's money came from a family business whose interests included the creation of the Northern, Piccadilly and Bakerloo lines of the London Underground. He lived in a Mayfair mansion where he entertained the likes of Elgar, Grieg, Debussy and Strauss.

But he was widely generous, helping to create the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London's East End and part-funding Captain Scott's ill-fated trip to Antarctica – for all of which he was rewarded with a baronetcy.







The only problem was his parentage: the Speyers were German, which didn't bode well in World War I. Edgar was accused of spying, almost certainly without foundation, then hounded out of Britain. Whereupon the Proms fell into penury again – saved this time by the music publishers Chappell, who agreed in 1922 to underwrite them so long as the second half of each concert provided a platform for the popular ballads that Chappell sold as sheet music, a promotional deal that literally papered over an injustice.

### Hubert Parry (1848-1918)

Parry's music always featured in the Proms, but for more modern audiences his connection rests with one piece: *Jerusalem*, beloved of Last Night audiences, though their understanding of it is perhaps not quite what the composer planned.

He was a country-gentleman: Etonian, wealthy, living in a country pile in Gloucestershire, with all the makings of a model patriot. And the initial context for



his song (it was a song, not a hymn) in 1916 was an unequivocally patriotic Queen's Hall rally for an organisation called Fight for Right, set up to support the war effort.

But soon after the premiere Parry grew uncomfortable with Fight for Right and handed over his song to the Women's Suffrage movement, with which he felt more sympathy. By then the song was orchestrated. But it had no Proms performance until 1942 and didn't make it to a Last Night until 1953. Since then it's surfaced with robust insistence every year.

Whether the singing audience give much thought to William Blake's text is another matter. It's ambiguous and could mean anything from an attack on the Established church (the real 'Satanic Mills' being cathedrals) to a celebration of free love (those 'arrows of desire'). Blake was a radical free-thinker, not a member of the Women's Institute. And Parry too turned out to be a liberal-progressive whose rejection of conventional Christianity would never have accommodated any hope to see the Lamb of God in England's pleasant pastures.

### Malcolm Sargent (1895-1967)

Adored by audiences and amateur musicians, Sargent brought undoubted glamour to the Proms, presiding over them as chief conductor for two decades (1948-67) with enormous popular appeal. But he was also a divisive figure.

Born into modest circumstances that few would have guessed from the aristocratic manner he assumed, he came to the attention of Henry Wood as a composer and was invited to conduct his own *An Impression on a Windy Day* at a Prom in 1921 (see p6). But the conducting turned out to be more impressive than the score, and a career was born.

He was a fine technician: confident, clear, ice-cool under pressure – not least during wartime concerts where he had a habit of encouraging his audience to stay put as the bombs dropped down. And he was lucky, conducting the last ever concert at Queen's Hall on the afternoon of the day it was destroyed by an incendiary bomb.

All this made him famous, and he cultivated a profile – partly through the charismatic charm with which he drew nimble *Messiahs* from north-country choral societies, but also through the Proms' Last Night, which he remodelled as a platform for himself. He actively encouraged the disorderly exuberance of the crowd, insisting that 'if people get as enthusiastic about music as they do about football, it is all to the good.'

His players grew less enthusiastic, though, finding him aloof and shallow; and the sharp-cut suits and buttonhole carnations he wore perhaps endorse that view. But his nickname of 'Flash Harry' has an interesting ambivalence. Hostile or affectionate? Perhaps both.





Dressed to impress: Prommers at the Last Night

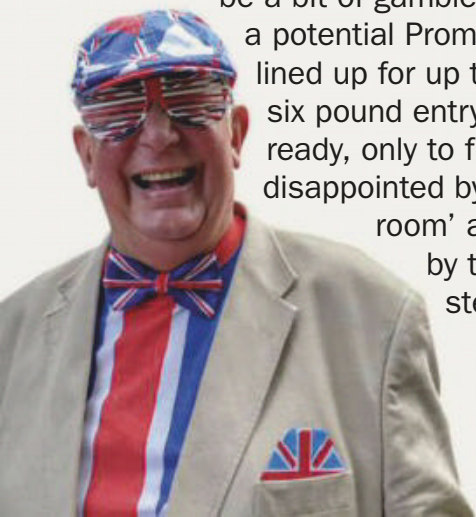
## Meet the Promenaders

### *The Albert Hall's standing army*

Promenading was a feature of concerts long before Henry Wood launched his festival, when wandering in and out mid-performance was deemed perfectly acceptable. Today's Promenaders – who, in a full house, make up roughly 1,400 of the Royal Albert Hall's near-6,000 capacity – tend to stay put, either standing (or occasionally sitting or lying) in the central Arena or in the Gallery at the very top.

The heart and soul of the audience, they certainly like to make themselves heard. Whether it's shouting 'heave!' (Arena) and 'ho!' (Gallery) when the piano lid is lifted before a piano concerto or applauding the A played to tune the orchestra up, the Prommers' pre-performance rituals have become part of tradition. In more recent seasons, the end of the interval has been marked by a chorus of season ticket-holding Prommers serenading the audience with details of how much they have raised for charity through collections at the door – a tradition that itself has been going since 1967.

To get the best spot as a Promenader, you need to be a hardy beast, as queueing outside for the most popular concerts begins as early as eight in the morning. Queueing can be a bit of gamble, though – many a potential Promenader has lined up for up to two hours, six pound entry fee at the ready, only to find themselves disappointed by the 'no more room' announcement by the red-coated stewards.



## William Glock (1908-2000)

Glock is someone else whose reputation see-saws – in accordance with the kind of repertoire the Proms are seen as there to serve. He was a polymath administrator/critic/pianist (studying with Artur Schnabel) who became the BBC's controller of music and ran the Proms from 1960-73, taking charge at a time when many thought their programmes had subsided into safe predictability.

Glock was a modernist. Asked what he had to offer audiences he replied, 'What they will like tomorrow' with unspoken acceptance that they might not like it today. And to begin with, they didn't. Proms audiences fell in the early 1960s, and Glock was seen as a hardliner, purging the Proms of pleasure, forcing people to sit through Stockhausen and Boulez and black-listing English composers who dared to write tunes.

Only some of this is true. There were no blacklists. And though European modernism certainly ranked high on his agenda, so did medieval music, chamber music, Indian ragas and opera (starting with a *Don Giovanni* that he imported from Glyndebourne, semi-staged, in 1961).

Glock opened out the Proms in every way – extending their reach to new venues, late-night events, and foreign orchestras and conductors. Above all, he began the practice of commissioning new works every year. And though it generated anguished statements in Parliament that 'this man will ruin the Proms', he didn't. Audiences rose. The seasons felt invigorated by a spirit of adventure. And even if the listening public failed to love what it was introduced to, it became more tolerant, appreciative and informed.

## Jennifer Vyvyan (1925-74)

Not everyone remembers Vyvyan today, but through the mid years of the 20th century she was exemplary of the successful British singers who were mainstays of the Proms during an era of transition – from variety-style programmes to the more coherent statements we expect now.

Born into a landed family who owned large chunks of Cornwall, she was an outstanding coloratura soprano who began by doing whatever came her way –



including the aria from Dyson's *Canterbury Pilgrims* that marked her Proms debut in 1950 and became a calling-card. Throughout the 1950s and '60s she turned up year after year at the Albert Hall, singing everything from Mozart arias to Gilbert & Sullivan.

Her speciality, though, was Handel – and not just in oratorio but playing a significant role in the stage revival of the composer's operas. She was also taken up by Britten who wrote major roles for her, not least the Governess in *Turn of the Screw*. And so you find Vyvyan at the Proms singing his *Cantata Academica* in 1961, his realisation of Purcell's *Fairy Queen* in 1971 and his 60th-birthday performance of *Gloriana* in 1973.

That she died the very next year, prematurely from a chronic lung condition, cut short a career that should have given her a spotlit place in music history. It almost did. And in the process it helped to take the Proms through their mid 20th-century change of style.





Taking control: (clockwise from left) former BBC presenter and head of music Humphrey Burton has a go with the baton in 2001; soprano Jennifer Vyvyan; William Glock, who inspired mixed feelings

of the arts world: grand, imperious but managing to stockpile choice positions – as director of the Edinburgh Festival, BBC controller of music, controller of Radio 3 and director of the Proms during the 1980s and '90s. All were jobs in which he proved formidable.

Drummond fought for serious music at the Beeb in times when it was under threat. He programmed without compromise. He had an instinct for commissioning successful works like James MacMillan's *Confession of Isobel Gowdie* or John Tavener's *Protecting Veil*. And he enlarged the vision of the Proms to a degree where his final season, in 1995, could boast 35 orchestras, 50 conductors and 112 composers. Undeniably impressive.

At the same time, though, he had a vicious tongue that made him enemies (a standard compliment was 'Good to see you back on form at last'). He name-dropped comically (losing his spectacles, he'd tell you that they must have fallen down the back of the Queen Mother's sofa. Well of course). And he could be an intellectual bully, though the intellect was sharp.

Despising his required association with the Proms' Last Night, his parting gesture was to take revenge on it with a notorious commission: Birtwistle's relentlessly hard-going *Panic* which, at Drummond's absolute insistence, went into the second half where Promenaders usually expect a bit of fun. In truth, it *was* fun if you understood the joke. Not everybody did.

### Sarah Walker (b1943)

One of Britain's best-loved mezzo-sopranos and a favourite at the Proms across the 1970s to '90s, Sarah Walker made a deathless contribution to the culture (more particularly couture) of the Last Night by appearing onstage to sing 'Rule Britannia' in a crazy frock.

In fact she did it twice: initially in 1985 when, as she says, 'I got the Last Night invitation on a day I happened to be rehearsing with [the accompanist] Graham Johnson, and we decided I'd need something impactful to wear. So Graham wrote a letter to Dame Edna Everage, asking for advice and the name of her dress designer.'

The result was a dress that, on release of a button, turned into a Union Flag. ▶

## 'Leonard Bernstein arrived to conduct his concert absurdly late, about 7.28'

### Humphrey Burton (b1931)

When the BBC took over management of the Proms in 1927 (after Chappells walked away), it wasn't universally applauded. Thomas Beecham, for example, castigated broadcasting as 'devilish work' that would destroy live concerts. But the Proms and radio turned out to be a good match. And in 1953 came television where, a few years later, Humphrey Burton made his mark: initially as a presenter, then as head of music and arts during the 1960s and '70s.

As the viewing figures grew, you might have thought they'd give the TV team more power – though Burton says he was never allowed any input into planning. 'We were renegades, kept in our place and required to make our broadcast choices well in advance so the Proms Guide could

warn its readers "This programme will be televised" – probably as a courtesy to errant husbands at risk of being spotted with their girlfriends.'

But while two-timing Promenaders were at risk, performers could be curiously indifferent to the massive audience they were reaching. 'There was one occasion when Leonard Bernstein came to conduct his *Songfest* and arrived for the concert absurdly late, about 7.28,' says Burton. 'John Drummond (see below) was beside himself with rage when LB muttered "But it's only radio".'

### John Drummond (1934-2006)

Blessed with what someone called an 'unlimited capacity for indignation', John Drummond was a sort of Lady Bracknell





Job done: Kissin leaves the Albert Hall in 1997

## Me, myself and I

### *Solo performers at the Proms*

With a capacity approaching 6,000 people and a huge space to fill, the Royal Albert Hall is not a venue one instantly associates with intimate solo recitals – large orchestral and choral concerts, plus the occasional semi-staged opera, tend to be its forte.

A select few musicians have, however, been invited to come and share the Proms stage with no one but themselves. In 1997, the 26-year-old Evgeny Kissin made history when he gave the first ever Proms solo piano recital – at the end of his Sunday afternoon concert of Haydn, Liszt and Chopin, the Russian took advantage of his single status by giving no fewer than seven encores.

Kissin's fellow pianist András Schiff has given three solo Proms recitals, playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in 2015 and the same composer's *Well-Tempered Clavier* in 2017 (Book 1) and 2018 (Book 2). Bach was also the composer of choice for solo Proms by violinist Nigel Kennedy (below) in 2011 and cellist Yo-Yo Ma in 2015, the latter playing all six of the cello suites in a single evening. And, along with Liszt, Widor, Saint-Saëns and various others, JSB was also part of the programme performed last year by Olivier Latry. In this instance, however, filling the Albert Hall with sound was not an issue, as Latry was at the console of the venue's vast organ.



Put out the flags: Sarah Walker sings at the Last Night, 1989

And when she did the Last Night again, in 1989, there was something even more spectacular involving four Union Flags.

It set a precedent. All Last Night soloists, male or female, now dress to impress. And as for those originating frocks, they had an afterlife. 'I paid for them myself,' says Walker, 'so they had to earn their keep. I wore them all over the world, at Last Night concerts in Australia, South America... But I eventually sold one to a man who worked in the accounts department at the Royal Opera House. He wears it for a drag act in a bar in Soho.'

### **Thomas Allen** (b1944)

As one of the truly great British baritones, Thomas Allen was a Proms regular for almost 40 years, starring in many of the full operas that the Proms have taken in, like *Magic Flute*, *Don Giovanni*, *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*.

But there's one date he'd probably rather forget, although no one will let him. It was 1974, in days before the Albert Hall had air conditioning and

hardly a night passed without the St John Ambulance Brigade carrying someone out of the arena on a stretcher, suffering from the heat.

On this occasion, though, the casualty was on the platform. During *Carmina Burana* Allen felt faint, roused himself and then collapsed (with an appalling thud that many will remember, listening on radio and wondering what was going on).

Patrick McCarthy, a young singer in the audience, seized his chance and to the obvious surprise of everyone onstage rushed up to save the show. Which was particularly brave as it was being televised. It didn't bring McCarthy lasting fame, but it secured him a small mention in Proms history. And a rousing cheer from several thousand people on the night.

### **Andrew Davis** (b1944)

For the record, John Barbirolli clocked up 44 Proms appearances, Pierre Boulez 69 and Colin Davis 142. But at 131 and counting, Andrew Davis can claim the most of any living conductor, partly





A clean performance: Stephen Hough (vacuum cleaner) and David Attenborough (floor polisher) play Arnold's *A Grand, Grand Overture*, 2009

thanks to his years in charge of the BBC Symphony Orchestra from 1989-2000.

His desert island dates, he says, included Tippett's *Mask of Time* and a concert for the 50th anniversary of Vaughan Williams's death. The horrors were an Elgar Cello Concerto transcribed for viola and 'the worst new piece I've ever had to premiere. Immense. With Wagner tubas. God knows why.'

But something he invariably made a great success of was the Last Night. He's done 12, approaching them with 'a mix of eager anticipation and utter dread' but touching just the right note and delivering the best end-of-season speeches on record.

These days, the conductor's speech tends to be vetted by BBC executives. 'But they didn't get the chance with me,' he says. 'I always promised I'd do a draft the week before but somehow never got round to it.' So the result was largely spur of the moment, and one moment in particular was difficult – in 1997 when, just days beforehand, there had been three conspicuous deaths: Georg Solti, Mother Teresa and Princess Diana.

Davis handled the occasion perfectly: so well, in fact, that two weeks later he received a letter from a vicar asking him to come and give a sermon.

### Odaline de la Martinez (b1949)

When Henry Wood admitted women into his Proms orchestra in 1913, Thomas Beecham complained that 'if they are pretty, they distract men, and if they are ugly, they distract me.' It wasn't a winning argument. But it took half a century for the Proms to welcome a woman to the podium

## 'I always promised I'd do a draft speech, but never got round to it'

for an entire concert; and when that happened, in 1984, the woman in question was Odaline de la Martinez.

She was conducting her own ensemble, Lontano, in a programme of new music that in itself might not have drawn so much attention. But with Martinez in charge, the press had a field day. She looked like a trailblazer – although she insists she wasn't.

'There were always women in every aspect of music,' she says, 'right back to

the troubadours, but they emerged and disappeared like a sine wave. Which is how it still is. As a conductor I faced challenges, but I got on with it.'

Martinez went on to do half-a-dozen Proms in the 1980s and '90s, culminating in a performance of Ethel Smyth's opera *The Wreckers*; and she remains a champion of women in the music world. But change, as she perceives it, has been slow and circular. 'We seemed to be opening a door but then it shut again – until very recently. The only answer is to keep on pushing.'

A significant step in the right direction was at least taken when, in 2013, Marin Alsop became the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the Proms. So popular did the US conductor prove that, two years later, she was invited to do it again.

### Stephen Hough (b1961)

With 28 Proms under his belt since the mid-1980s, the pianist Stephen Hough is a firm audience favourite. And though his repertoire has largely stayed with core concertos (Mozart, Rachmaninov and the four Tchaikovsky works for piano and orchestra given as a series in 2009) he has also made a distinguished appearance at the Last Night playing a vacuum cleaner – in Malcolm Arnold's *Grand, Grand* ▶





The bigger picture: (left to right) Thomas Allen, Sarah Fox, Seth MacFarlane, Kim Criswell and Curtis Stigers join John Wilson at the MGM Musical Prom, 2009; (below) composer Anna Meredith



*Overture*, sharing the stage with David Attenborough on floor polisher.

As someone who admits ‘I don’t do much housework’, it was a rare encounter with domestic appliances. But rarer still was his encounter with Queen Victoria’s gilded piano, which in 2019 was delivered from Buckingham Palace for use in a Mendelssohn concerto.

‘It was worrying,’ he reflects, ‘because I’d tried it out in a Palace room with deep carpets and heavy curtains, and thought: this won’t be audible, the sound is too thin. But at the Albert Hall it was totally different: luminous and magical. Your instinct with the Hall is that you’ll have to throw the sound to fill the space, but actually you don’t: you can play softly and it carries. And playing this piano which hadn’t left its padded room in 150 years, brought tears to my eyes. It felt like releasing someone from prison. Not that Buckingham Palace is a prison.’

### John Wilson (b1972)

John Wilson is a Proms phenomenon. Conducting the orchestra that bears his name, he’s been a fixture of every season since 2009, delivering classic Hollywood and Broadway rep with an exhilarating synthesis of spark and scholarship.

He takes it seriously, does it brilliantly, and audiences go wild – although there

was resistance to begin with. ‘It took a while to get our first concert,’ says Wilson, ‘and generated a seven-week correspondence in the *Radio Times* with people writing to say Sir Malcolm Sargent would turn in his grave. But eventually people came to appreciate that Hollywood composers knew as much about orchestral writing as anyone and that we present them with the care and attention we’d give to Beethoven or Mozart. Which is what I actually spend most of my time doing.’

Wilson’s best experience at the Albert Hall? ‘Our first Prom when we played *I got Rhythm*, the audience burst into applause mid-performance, and it took the roof off. The thrill of my life.’

And the worst? ‘Our semi-staged *Oklahoma* in 2017 when all the singers started losing their voices during rehearsal and we couldn’t think why until the last-minute discovery that it was due to the hay bales we had onstage as props. We swapped them for plastic ones and were saved. But not without sleepless nights.’

### Anna Meredith (b1978)

The Proms have never been averse to spectacle. And as their grander statements have increasingly embraced technology,

so they’ve gone knocking at the door of Anna Meredith: a composer of impeccably classical credentials who has moved on into the category-free territories of club music, performance art and electronica.

Two years ago she teamed up with a video installation company for one of the most dazzling things ever experienced at a Proms First Night: the epic sound and light show that was *Five Telegrams*, based on communications from the trenches in the First World War and turning the Albert Hall into a stately discotheque. With orchestra and massed choirs.

Busy, bold and strong, it made an exhilarating follow-up to something she’d done ten years earlier for the Last Night: a logistical headache called *froms* that involved coordinating the BBC Symphony Orchestra playing in London with performing groups in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This was asking for trouble, but as Meredith recalls ‘nothing went more wrong than I expected it to. Not all the feeds came in, and there were time delays, but it was written to allow for chaos and I think it worked. Not that I’d want it to be done again.’